

Distance Learning for Student-Inmates in Higher Education through Digital Mobile Devices

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Abstract

University students with particular constraints require alternative educational approaches that compensate for these limitations that they face. In fact, unable to follow traditional classroom training, “student-inmates” (Pike& Adams 2012) turn to distance learning. But today, unlike before, this practice is dependent on an Internet connection through learning platforms. Learning platforms allow the student’s work to be organized, and for digital resources to be readily available, which can be submitted and reviewed. But also, students can communicate with teachers and tutors.

In France, except in experimental cases in a few penitentiaries, prisons are not connected to the Internet. Therefore, educational and technical solutions for this particular setting must be provided by instructors in higher education as well as instructional designers. The research presented in this paper is ongoing and it focuses on the project entitled, IDEFI (Initiatives d’Excellence pour l’enseignement et la formation innovantes)ⁱ, at the University of Paul-Valéry Montpellier.

The objective of this project is to increase the success rate of student-inmates during their freshman year of university studies. For this population, this means receiving education through the use of digital mobile devices, promoting active participation. Following this approach, teachers involved create a pedagogical environment that fosters learning within the penal system. For example, cultural tours can be provided via video recordings for inmate research through digital platforms from students outside the correctional system. Educators in higher education also propose other activities that help maintain a link with the outside world.

In light of the existence of special educators in the prison context, digital mobile devices can provide support for the development and integration of best practices. Because of that, the assessment of the activities must be strictly individual and pedagogical resources should be installed on authorized mobile devices in correctional facilities.

Throughout this article, solutions are offered and examples are given on how distance learning can be adapted to the prison context through the use of digital mobile devices and more generally, adapted to an environment without Internet access.

The Contribution of Digital Pedagogy to Distance Learning Programs in France

Distance learning education which formerly provided its correspondence through the mail, that is through postal services, has seen an expansion over the past several years due to the development of digital pedagogy through academic courses, but also through Massively Open Online Courses (MOOC). The use of learning platforms such as the LMS (Learning Management System) has created the possibility for teachers to offer print, sound and audiovisual resources online to students as well as self and collaborative learning activities within a pedagogical framework for educational purposes. This pedagogical approach is called “digital” because it is supported by information technology and by communication. In addition, it encourages teachers to transmit and acquire knowledge, skills and expertise at any place or time. It places students in an active position through their use of personal electronic devices and allows them to learn and to communicate with peers and teachers (Martin, MacGill and Sudweeks, 2013)³. However, the remote dissemination of teaching modules is not the only attractive component.

Digital pedagogy also allows lessons to be customized and adapted for different situations as shown through the applications of mobile learning (Nedungadi& Raman, 2012)⁴. Among those affected are those who live in geographical zones in which the wireless connection is weak or in the case of inmates in French penitentiaries where there is no Internet access.

Educational activities in prison are severely limited because of the absence of the Internet (Hancock 2010)². In addition to the approach chosen by Pike and Adams (2012)⁵ which aims to “(...) identify what technology was available to student-inmates, how it was accessed and used to support learning and the cultural attitudes towards technology-supported learning in prison”, we would like to emphasize the adaptive nature of distance learning.

Educational activities in prison are subject to penitentiary and educational mechanisms at work. These activities help those studying to form an “inmate-student” identity (Vettraino-Soulard 1980)⁸ and Salane(2010)⁶. They underlie the idea developed by Smith and Silverman (1994)⁷. This idea places the priority on giving the inmate an activity to participate in, a sense of something to do during his/her time in prison instead of giving him/her the goal of obtaining a diploma or finding a job.

Distance Learning for Student-Inmates

More specifically, we are interested in distance learning in higher education. This fits within the legislative and organizational framework where both institutions, universities and prisons, interact to preserve the right to an education for those in prison. The number of detainees in university courses is quite low : only 1.4% out of 46186 inmates in a course of study are working towards a degree in higher education. Teachers on site rarely have a university degree (the majority have completed one or two years of training to teach middle school or high school).

In France, these distant learning programs are offered by specialized services from universities or through the *Centre National d’Enseignement à Distance* (CNED)ⁱⁱ. Distance learning still remains the preferred method, “a first response adapted for this population”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Some institutions put certain mechanisms into place in order to provide a university education close to the conditions in prison. One possible solution is the *Section des Etudiants Empêchés* (SEE) from the University of Paris – Diderot. Historically this was the first organization to offer university courses in prison as a result of the involvement with instructors in various prisons. It is similar to the University of La Rochelle, which also offers detainees the possibility to borrow books from the library through a distance lending system.

However, two main obstacles make this method difficult to implement. First of all, few or no universities offer programs to student-inmates. Next, the courses are either offered through paper resources because of the lack of Internet access or they are downloaded by the *Responsable Locale d'Enseignement* (RLE)^{iv} of the prison, directly through the learning platform. In either case, the student-inmate has very little information about the final aims of the training.

Because of these obstacles, the idea presented by Decamps et al. (2009)¹ of the course management, which describes how each player carries out a particular role in the learning environment, is well-suited to this context. That is why we are committed to working alongside the IDEFI project run by the University of Paul-Valéry Montpellier and more specifically through an initiative entitled “Publics Empêchés”, whose objective is to encourage success in first-year university students, through customized methods of teaching and learning, within a learning environment with no Internet access.

A Situated Learning Approach without Internet Access

Because of the lack of Internet access as well as other constraints within the French penal system, French universities are pushed into taking an alternative approach to distance learning. To better understand this approach, we compare the two different learning environments: those with and those without Internet access.

Distance Learning Tool	Learning Context	
	With Internet Access	Without Internet Access
	Platform (LMS)	
Access to Training and to Instructors	Available for student to access different content material	Available for RLE No access for student
		↓ A mobile support device is provided when educational resources are integrated
Contents	-Access to internal and external	- Documents in different formats

	documents in different formats; -Integrated and external websites -Material and activity offerings on the platform -Access to online resources	- Integrated website - No access to online resources
		↓ Creation of documents and adaptation of documents already available
Activities	Individual activities and/or self-study; activities in groups and/or in collaboration with other individuals	Individual activities and/or self-study
Materials (Devices)	Personal mobile device or multimedia room on site	Multimedia room with restricted access
Communication between peers	Communication tools from the Internet platform and from social networks	Face to face discussion if the group has been formed within the establishment, if not, no communication
Communication with university instructor	Communication tools from the Internet platform	No direct relationship with the student nor experimental relationship via video conferencing
		↓ Creation of a record between the instructor and the student mediated through the RLE
Evaluation	Individual and in groups (collaborative)	Individual

The sections in color in the table above highlight the existing modifications with regard to the course management, from access to the course to its evaluation. Furthermore, we note that in the learning context with no Internet access there is neither support from exterior links nor is

there communication between peers. It is precisely for this reason that the scenario-building and written content must be tailored to fit this alternative setting.

Methodology

The observations in this study are conducted through an ethnographic approach and the researchers take the role of participant observer. This study aims to understand what processes are involved in the scenario-building of the course and the resources that correspond to the specific features and constraints of the learning environment. To do this, we are studying a micro-situation: the modification of resources in first-year university students by teachers at the department of Humanities and Social Sciences. Within the framework of the IDEFI project, it is possible to distinguish the different integrated and/or interactive activities that contribute to a modification in the transmission of and/or the fundamental elements of a course. For this purpose, different data has been collected : records of the stages of the adaptation process of the university instruction between members within the project itself (meetings and individual interviews) and with the six teachers who taught first-year university courses. We are equally committed to taking dynamic screen shots to draw attention to the design in order to capture the best scripts built during the adaptation period in a specific learning situation.

Our role as participant observer involves our active participation in several modifications of the course as well as in the digital instructional materials for student-inmates particularly at the interface level and though Internet access. Details are given below of the modifications in the process of scenario-building.

Research Findings

In online education for student-inmates, university instructors have voiced different fears with regard to the design of courses than they normally would with traditional distance education courses. They are aware of the different demands of the situation that will impact their pedagogic choices according to the objectives of their course. But, it is interesting to see that the constraints imposed by the instructors in the activities and the instructional materials are not the ones that we introduced in the table describing the course management, which include:

- no Internet access and thus impossible to use the platform;
- direct relationship impossible except through the RLE
- lack of communication with other students and thus no peer support

In the first example, the instructor who was intrigued by this type of learning situation finds himself from the start facing a problem, as he is the one who designs courses for students and he “ hadn’t restricted their travel ”^v. This level of detail seemed complex to him because this course shouldn’t be theoretical, but the teaching should call upon both real and virtual mobility, « This could have been, for example, a theoretical course like the one that I took as an introduction to word processing I think that I would have said that it was a form of EAD I’m getting used to it a little more, but like a course of media and cultural news it was to develop mainstream culture and for that reason, I asked to leave to change cultural practices a bit and go to a film to do a critique about the latest movies that I had seen at the beginning I felt held back and I said to myself how am I going to adapt to this course it’s not possible»^{vi}.

In the following case, an instructor describes a solution put forward by an instructional designer: “ It was there that he was able to let go telling me that you had created a video where we could try to recreate the physical outings within a virtual space that I had asked my other students to do so it was really thanks to that work with the educational designers that I was able to let go and after that I had other ideas too and I told myself, well since they can’t leave the penitentiary facilities I’ve got to think about the videos but at the beginning I was a bit blocked ”^{vii}.

Thus it is the inability for student-inmates to move or travel outside the facility that produces a change in the instructional materials. It is the difficulty to reproduce distance education, as in a traditional setting, that pushes instructors, with the aid of instructional designers, to find alternative teaching/learning solutions to reach the course objectives.

In the second case, the instructor highlights the fact that the instructional output is not accessible by the university platform but through a portable support device (CD ROM or USB). In fact, the course materials produced are received first by the instructional designers that are responsible for setting up the support system, then by the RLE responsible for providing support and finally by the student-inmate. This multiple responsibility challenges the instructor, who is then worried about certain content that may not comply with copyright laws. It is for this reason that the instructor limits the number of images within in the instructional materials and asks for these items to be returned at the end of the year. This, at various levels, seems to the instructor, a constraint. The instructor thus adopts a more conservative attitude with regards to the content transmitted, claiming the need for strict compliance with copyright laws, a constraint that s/he may never have voiced before, within this learning context.

The third case makes reference to the need for the instructor to develop a meta-language and increase the amount of explanation provided due to the lack of information that the student has and the communication obstacles that exist between the instructor and the student. If the flow of information always seems possible through various forms of communication, “ in general with EAD, I always put all of the info at the beginning on the platform on the evaluation I try to be the most detailed possible the most clear and there are sometimes certain things that I forget but the number of pages in the file (...) it’s a time when they can ask questions (...) ”^{viii}, it appears to no longer be the case for student-inmates. “ So with student-inmates I have the impression that I explain quite a lot in my course lots of meta-language about the instruction because afterward I won’t have the opportunity to communicate with the student and that was one of my worries that helped me with the IDEFI was to tell myself there that I wouldn’t have to go back because I didn’t know the student’s last name first name if it was a girl or a boy (...) I wanted the course to be the most complete and most subjective possible so I put in a bit more text and a few more exercises to compensate for the lack of communication. ”^{ix}

As the documents supplied by this instructor show, the image is present in the original document for student-inmates. However, the image does not appear in the document that is intended for a wider audience of students in EAD.

<p>«Mommy», de cris et de grandeur</p>  <p>Anne Dorval, la mère de «Mommy». (Photo Shayne Laverdière)CRITIQUE</p> <p>Rien à foutre, à fond et jusqu'au bout ! Le 5e film de Xavier Dolan bouscule.</p>	<p>«Mommy», de cris et de grandeur</p> <p><i>Critique de Libération du 05/10/14, par Gérard Lefort.</i></p> <p>Mommy nous parvient à ce jour nimé d'un boucan laudatif né en mai au festival de Cannes et qui depuis n'a fait qu'augmenter. Son jeune auteur, Xavier Dolan, garule de mode idéale, migron comme un cœur, a œuvré à intensifier ce déluge de dihyresmes, s'adonnant sans réserve aux couvertures de tous les magazines, à moult émissions de télévision.</p>
<p>Extrait du document pour étudiant-détenu</p>	<p>Extrait du document pour étudiant EAD</p>

The instructor, using this resource, compiled specific documents for student-inmates using meta-language and instructions but also with embellished content that compensate for the absence of communication. She also anticipated issues that could arise from this audience of learners through supplying additional support materials. Given the limitations in available information, she produced the most comprehensive resource possible.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this research show that university instructors have broadened the scope of constraints, or brought forth new constraints, within the distance learning setting for student-inmates. It is interesting to note that the constraints found are those most closely linked to the design of instructional materials. In fact, this study does not only focus on the limitations found with materials, but it conveys a new analysis of an instructional tool that may be adapted for this specific learning context. University instructors connect the objectives of the lessons, the materials to be produced and the learning context directly with one another. They adapt indeed, creating resources in this specific learning context. They have also brought forth other variables in distance learning that were not necessarily taken into account before : (1) the inability to travel, (2) copyrights and intellectual property rights, (3) the development of a meta-language, of instructions and of content.

Situational and educational constraints play into the dynamics in the implementation of distance learning lessons. In order to adapt best to specific cases, a larger reflection must occur on the type of scenario-building that should be put into place. We can now ask ourselves how the modifications made in resources for student-inmates can benefit other students. Distance learning that occurs in a learning context without Internet access is a motor for the development of scenario-building of course content. Instructors are finding solutions for the limitations that at the beginning, as we remember, were the lack of Internet access and which hindered platform use, the impossibility of having a direct relationship with the student except through the RLE, and the lack of communication with other students, which meant no peer support. Teachers have embarked on broadening this debate of best practices in distance

learning tools in comparing the two following learning contexts – those with Internet access and those without – showing how they are different and how each can enrich already existing practices.

Different players in the university setting hold a common belief that training courses should be adapted according to their educational framework. However there is still need for reflection from prison administrators about the political implications of possible Internet use in prison.

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ⁱin Innovative Training and Education

ⁱⁱNational Center for Distance Learning

ⁱⁱⁱ « une première réponse adaptée à ce type de public ».

^{iv} Local Education Officer

^v « n'avaient pas de contraintes pour leur déplacement ».

^{vi} « cela aurait été par exemple un cours théorique comme là sur ce que je fais comme l'initiation à la médiation des textes je pense que j'aurais dit c'est une forme d'EAD je m'adapte un petit peu plus mais là comme le cours actualités médiatiques et culturelles c'était pour développer la culture G je leur demandais justement de sortir de changer de pratiques culturelles d'aller au cinéma de faire la critique des derniers films qu'ils avaient vus là au début je me suis sentie un plus bloquée en me disant voilà comment je vais adapter ce cours c'est pas possible ».

^{vii} « c'est là qu'il a réussi voilà à débloquent à me dire que vous aviez composé une vidéo qu'on pouvait aussi essayer de recréer sur un espace numérique les sorties physiques que je demandais aux étudiants donc c'est vraiment grâce à au travail avec les ingénieurs pédagogiques que j'ai pu débloquent après j'avais aussi d'autres idées je me disais bon comme ils peuvent pas forcément sortir du centre pénitencier essayer de réfléchir aux vidéos mais au début j'étais un peu bloquée ».

^{viii} « en général avec les EAD, je mets toutes les infos au début sur la plateforme sur l'évaluation j'essaie d'être la plus détaillée possible la plus claire et il y a des fois des choses que j'oublie par contre le nombre de pages dans le dossier (...) là c'est un temps où ils peuvent poser leurs questions (...) ».

^{ix} « alors qu'avec l'étudiant détenu j'avais l'impression que je fasse vraiment un cours très très expliqué beaucoup de métadiscours sur les consignes puisqu'après j'aurais pas la possibilité de communiquer avec lui et c'est ça qui a été une de mes appréhensions qui m'a aidé pour IDEFI c'était de me dire voilà que j'allais pas avoir de retour je ne savais pas son nom son prénom si c'était une fille ou un garçon (...) j'avais envie que les cours soient les plus complets les plus subjectifs possible donc j'ai mis un peu plus texte un peu plus d'exercice pour compenser aussi ce manque de communication ».